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ABSTRACT

Trigger films are an audience involvement media designed to achieve attitude and behavior modification. They are brief (under four minutes), high impact vignettes which portray specific problem situations, focusing upon the agent's motivations, and structured so as to trigger an emotional response by the viewer and to act as a catalyst for self-examination of the issues which lie at the heart of the matter at hand. They serve as film analogues to the Rorschach and Thematic Apperception Tests and have been used in such varying fields as gerontology, drug abuse education, driver training, mental retardation, jurisprudence, human relations, dental education, and library science. They provide an initial stimulus and only the most pertinent information, deal with realistic situations, and conclude at an open-ended high point where the conflict is unresolved and alternative solutions are possible. They are useful in group discussion and, when properly used, serve to break down defense mechanisms and to provoke thoughtful consideration of problematic situations. (Author/PB)

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# THE TRIGGER FILM:
# ITS HISTORY, PRODUCTION, AND UTILIZATION

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THE TRIGGER FILM

Trigger films are an audience involvement media. They are extremely short, high-impact vignettes which portray problem situations and are designed to "trigger" emotion and response in the viewer.

This document provides an introduction to trigger films by indicating their role in attitudinal learning and delineating the elements which are found in these tools for behavior modification. A history of the trigger film concept is presented including titles and brief descriptions of the various trigger productions. Guidelines are offered which pertain to considerations for trigger film production, and suggested utilization techniques are discussed.

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The Trigger Film:
Its History, Production, and Utilization

## Introduction

We are all aware that learning can take place in a variety of situations and via a spectrum of formats and strategies: individually, in small or large groups; by use of self-instruction, lecture, and discussion; with books, and audiovisual tools; and through such approaches as discovery, instructional systems approaches, and so forth. Furthermore, we know that some methods are more appropriate and successful for dealing with knowledge transfer than skill attainment and vice-versa. And then there is the elusive area of learning we have labeled the affective domain, the development of one's attitudinal disposition.

Often the objectives of affective learning are achieved through personal interaction with one's self and/or others. Many times such an instructional objective for learners, as prescribed by an educational program, will be to expand the learners' awareness by helping them to attain competency in recognizing and successfully coping with situations they are likely to encounter relative to their own feelings and with sensitivity to the feelings and viewpoints of others. The attainment of such a goal may be accomplished by a variety of methods such as on-site observations, discussions, role playing, and so forth; but, whatever the method, information must be introduced as the stimulus for the learners. This information might: provide specific perceptions, generate a particular mental state, dictate an emotional set, present a socially charged atmosphere, or offer a distinctive mood to any individual learner--or varying levels and degrees of such reactions may be developed in all who are exposed to the information stimulus. However, one or all of the same reactions will not necessarily be initially perceived nor produced in all learners in the same way.

A trigger film is just such an external stimulus resource, designed to set-the-stage to generate and elicit responses to the situation and information

provided.

What Are Trigger Films?

Trigger films are extremely short, problem centered, films which prompt the viewer to generate possible solutions and to furnish plausible endings based on his own experience. The idea upon which the trigger films is based came from the brief films produced by Séat-Cohen, a French psychologist, whose films portrayed uncertain situations--in a fashion similar to the use of the Rorchach and Thematic Apperception tests--to lead the viewer into self-introspection and interpretation. The label "trigger," was coined by Alfred Slote, Assistant Director of the University of Michigan Television Center. Slote is credited with the conception of this specialized film format and, with the assistance of William LaCrosse, Television Center Film Supervisor at the University of Michigan, he has been instrumental in the continued development of this technique for teaching purposes. Very simply, then, the meaning of the term "trigger," as applied to this film format and technique, is that the film acts as a catalyst by presenting in a crystal clear segment of time, a myriad of selected-but often ambiguous-details, concerned with a provocative topic, all of which are designed and calculated to evoke, or "trigger," viewer response.

The History of Trigger Films

Early forerunners to the trigger film as it is now known were discussion generating films produced by the National Film Board of Canada, the United States Air Force, and a series of films titled Pre-Retirement Education developed by Alfred Slote at the University of Michigan Television Center in conjunction with the U of M Department of Gerontology. The real impetus for the "trigger film" trend, however, began in the late sixties with the production of a series of films related to driving safety.

Trigger Films For Young Drivers were developed at the University of Michigan Television Center in 1967-'68 for the Highway Safety Research Institute in an

attempt to relate hard-to-reach drivers who were high school seniors. Research conducted by Donald C. Pelz and Stanley H. Schuman, of the U of M, was the basis upon which the content for these films was created. The object of these initial trigger films was to evoke analysis and thoughtful speculation of dangerous driving situations among an age group of drivers who had already recieved driver education training, possessed operator's licenses, and who, in many cases, were suspected of being self-reliant to the point of complacency. To accomplish this a set of films: Party; The Key; The Blonde; Go!; Homework; Dreamer; Speed; Pony-tail; The Date; Stop Sign; Lovebirds; Intersection; Tailgater; Don't Speed Up!; Afternoon Drive; Sandwich; Navigating; Yellow Light; C'mon, Get Going!; Hog; Passing #1; Passing #2; and Passing #3; depicting realistic, but extremely brief, sequences based on emotional and situational episodes, were developed to show behind-the-wheel behavior which would appeal and be corollary to a young driver's actual and fantasized experiences.

During his use of the "Driving Triggers," Stanley Schuman discovered another basic problem area, drug education, which became the foundation for the next series of trigger films. It was recognized that there was an important need for effectively communicating drug facts to the target audience identified as junior high school students. In 1970, through a Public Health Service grant and impetus from the U of M School of Public Health, Schuman and the U of M Television Center were able to produce three films, which required that youngsters viewing these films seek answers from within themselves relative to the personal temptations often associated with drug experimentation or use. These "Drug Triggers:" Linda, The Window, The Door are constructed around the themes of rebellion against authority, feelings of loneliness or boredom, and conformity or status brought about by peer pressure.

Early in 1971, the Administration on Aging (HEW) came to the Television Center and requested some trigger films dealing with a variety of themes and based on topics scheduled for discussion in state and national "White House

Conference on Aging" that were to be held that year. Upon analysis it was determined that the thread which was woven into all the aspects related to the prescribed themes was that of money. From this money origin sprang the "Aging Triggers:" To Market, To Market; Mrs. P; The Center; Dinner Time; and Tagged. This is a series of films portraying the reaction of keenly perceptive elderly persons to the differing monetary situations which confront them and episodes poignantly stress the insensitivity and out-of-touchness with which the "younger" world often approaches the needs of the aging.

All trigger situations have not necessarily been shot on location, and, although the term which labels this specialized information presentation includes the word "film," the materials using the "trigger" concept have not always been limited to this medium. Using the black and white videotape format and a studio as the backdrop, Jack R. Stanley of the U of M Television Center staff produced, in 1970-'71, some triggers dealing with mental retardation and the law. The production of these materials was partially sponsored by a grant from the Division of Mental Retardation and Rehabilitation Service Administration (HEW) and initiated through the Television Center by the U of M Institute for the Study of Mental Retardation which suggested the content based on Materials developed by their staff members, Henry G. DeYoung and Sterling L. Rose. The "Mental Retardation and the Law Triggers:" Jerry, Raymond, and Leonard were designed to be used at judicial conferences to suggest to judges that they take into consideration an individual's capabilities, the merit of the particular commitment criteria they apply to an individual case, and the need for seeking expert advice from those educated in the field of mental retardation when interpreting the law and deciding the future of such mentally handicapped human beings. Electronically recording and editing these triggers in a studio controlled environment allowed the producer the flexibility and economy which such black and white video taping

is typically noted for in comparison to on-location, colored motion picture production. These videotapes were then transferred to 16mm film footage. This set of triggers varies from the earlier productions in that they are more clinical in nature, their intent being to provide information through the use of dialog so as to show the great disparity between current laws which govern the mentally retarded and the actual abilities which are possessed by many of the "so-called" retarded.

Similar to the trigger films on mental retardation discussed above are the series of six video vignettes directed by Rick Hensley of the U of M Personnel Training and Development Department which were produced late in 1973 through the U of M Television Center. These "Secretarial Triggers" were designed to portray the human interaction between two or more people. It is the negative aspects in these situations which are emphasized so as to provoke thought and behavior change in the target audience.

Like the triggers cited above, an extensive number of video triggers were produced between 1970-'72 by the U of M Dental School Telecommunications staff in coordination and under the direction of A. L. Fisch, formerly with the U of M School of Public Health; Robert G. Hansen, University of Oklahoma School of Dentistry; and Bernard G. H. Smith, Dental School of the London Hospital Medical College. This extensive series, produced in color on videotape, was originated under a basic educational improvement grant from the U. S. Public Health Service to the U of M School of Dentistry. However, two of these episodes have been sponsored by the U of M Departments of Community Dentistry, and Educational Resources. The purpose of these triggers is to focus on the interaction between instructor and student in the teaching-learning process and portrays this relationship in a variety of situations. The "Dental Triggers" which depict aspects of teaching as they occur under clinical, classroom, and counseling circumstances are comprised of twenty episodes: Referral, Criticism, Clinic, Evaluating, Grades,

Easy Grader, Thoughts, Students, Expectation, Lecture, Distraction, Exams, Teaching, Feedback Seminar, Discussion, Interruptions, Advice, Problem, Information, and Studying.

Certainly the production and utilization of trigger films falls within the stated domain of media specialists. The question was asked, "Why couldn't this technique be applied to some of the basic problems which are faced by in-the-field media specialists?" The answer to this question was the production of a series of three trigger films by the U of M Television Center under the direction of Al Slote. The impetus and content ideas for the "Media Triggers:" Charge Desk, Media Center, and The Projector were developed by Thomas Downen, Helen Lloyd, Edward Newren, Warren Palmer, and Kenneth Vance, the core faculty of the School Library Media Specialist Program in the School of Library Science at the University of Michigan. The films were produced under funding derived from a portion of the Knapp SLMP Grant, administered by the American Library Association which had been recieved by the U of M School of Library Science for the development of an experimental program for training school library media specialists. Each of these three triggers provides the physical and emotional setting of a problem which faces media professionals today--the importance of people vs. things in a service situation, the real effects of theft and measures to prevent theft, the question--of service vs. policy Each of these triggers is designed to be used with pre-service as well as in-service media specialists.

In the past, trigger films have earned such prestigeous awards as the CINE, Gold Eagle Certificate; U. S. Industrial Film Festival, Gold Camera Award; Venice Film Festival, Silver Osella Medal; CINÉ, Gold Trophy Award; and the CINÉ, Special Award.

Trigger filming doesn't end here, however. Currently, the U of M Television Center is planning, producing, and readying for release trigger films which deal

with such timely topics as smoking and alcohol abuse. The production and use of trigger films across such a wide spectrum of topics and by such a diversity of educational and training organizations is compiling convincing evidence supporting the "trigger" concept as a significant educational and communicative innovation.

The Production of Trigger Films

If any one statement can truly characterize the techniques incorporated in the production of trigger films it would be that "there is no set formula." These are open-ended, tightly sequenced vignettes which extract the important elements from a much larger slice of life, and compress these elements into a brief but crystal clear and potent presentation. The approach used in developing each trigger film will differ depending on the intended target audience to be reached, the purpose to be achieved, the informational content to be presented, as well as the emphasis or de-emphasis of the visual and/or audio modes used.

The five guidelines, listed below, are basic to trigger film design and production:

- Provide an initial stimulus--not a complete story.
- Present only the information which is pertinent for and necessary to achieve the film's purpose. Avoid wandering from the main point with interesting side issues and embellishments.
- Be brief and succinct. Generally a trigger is from one to four minutes in length--but a 3-minute trigger may be too short just as a 45-second film may be too long.
- Choose realistic situations with which the target audience can easily identify.
- Conclude the film at its high point--where the conflict is unresolved and alternative solutions are possible.

The following "Don'ts" are temptations which should be resisted as any and all of them can easily destroy the intended mood and/or cause the loss of a desired

effect:

- Do not develop a "knowledge" package--the information presented should not be facts and the amount of information presented should be limited.
- Do not allow the film to be didactic nor to lecture--avoid sermons, messages, morals, "right" answers, and evaluative viewpoints.
- Shun the portrayal of circumstances which are developed into situations with distinct and conspicuous solutions or which candidly exhibit clear-cut and obvious answers.
- Do not permit the film to be a complete story in itself--denouement, closure, and endings are to be left to the audience.
- Don't allow the trigger episode to include more than one direction or the evocation of more than one kind of emotion.

What the trigger film producer should strive for is a vehicle which will set the stage and accelerate the progress of the viewer into the heart of the matter at hand by sharply focusing on a delimited topic. It should, through high impact, prompt self-discovery by proding the viewer into self-examination and eliciting from the viewer self awareness. If a trigger film can achieve this it will be an effective tool for behavior modification.

Utilization of Trigger Films

Since trigger films, in essence, are devices for simulating a situation which plunges the viewer into a realistic problem that emphasizes motivations, the root or cause, not the consequences; its nature is such as to be highly ambiguous with no set or predetermined outcome. It is this very nature which provides for a great amount of flexibility in the utilization of trigger films.

Typically trigger films are used in a peer-sharing approach which uses the discussion method as a means of developing an awareness experience within the individual members of a group. However, triggers are not limited to this approach. Other use patterns might emphasize role playing or observation of

real life situations which are similar to those depicted in a trigger. It is conceivable that triggers could even be viewed by persons individually. Whatever method is used initially, identification, focus, and closure or resolution of important factors associated with the situations depicted in the trigger films will generally be facilitated in the group setting by a mutual sharing of the feelings and ideas elicted.

When conducting a trigger discussion or experience, the leader should facilitate, rather than direct, the process. The following are two basic guidelines for discussion facilitators:

- Listen carefully--often a moment or two of attentive silence will be necessary to "break-the-ice," prod audience response, and/or stimulate brisk interactive discussion.
- Interact judiciously--use initiating questions to approach topics for possible discussion; responsive questions might be asked to acknowledge or clarify a discussant's reply or bring forth an elaboration; also, repeating or echoing a response is a good technique for building rapport with the audience, stimulating extended discussion of a point, and for focusing group attention on an expressed observation or feeling.

The facilitator's role is a difficult one. The stage is set for self-discovery when the group understands the purpose for their gathering and when they actively participate. The facilitator must strive to have the audience express what <u>they</u> think and feel. Facilitator-audience interaction should be kept to a minimum, with the emphasis being placed on audience-audience interactive participation. In this give-and-take type atmosphere the discussion facilitator's attitutde toward the group is of paramount importance. One must be patient and not attempt to force discussion. One must avoid value and moral judgements or views--allowing the audience to arrive at its own conclusions. This is generally achieved by being neutral--neither accepting nor disapproving--but encouraging

and supporting the participants views--being interested in replys.

It must be remembered that there are no wrong answers; no predetermined conclusions in trigger films. The facilitator should let the participants criticize the film at will, this will help to bring out the audience's own experiences. The discussion leader should also remember to permit discussions to carry participants on relevant excursions, but be alert and ready to bring the group back to the central topic from time to time. If discussions tend to wander, they may be guided back to relevant topics by asking questions about the theme.

The trigger films are the starting point. They should be shown and repeated if requested or if necessary for clarification and pertinent discussion. The differently titled triggers should not be projected one right after another, but should have discussion activities interspersed between each new title viewing. Utilization has shown that, generally, 40 to 60 minutes of discussion are stimulated by each trigger film. Some general discussion questions which might be used with most trigger films for generating participation include:

- What do you believe is happening in this film? What is it about?
- How is the setting of this scene like or different from similar places you have seen or been in?
- What are some of the "things" you noticed in the film, and how do they relate to the theme?
- Do you think the film is realistic?
- In your opinion, how might different circumstances change how these people act, or react to each other?
- In your opinion, what do you think happened prior to the episode we have seen? What is the cause of this situation?
- From your point of view, why do the people act as they do in this film? How do you think they should have acted? How would you have acted?

- Express what you believe each of these people are thinking and feeling. How would you feel in this situation?
- From your experience, how might the situation have been handled differently by any or all of the persons involved?
- How would you describe the persons portrayed in this film? What do you think they are really like?

Summary

Trigger films are audiovisual tools which assist with the learning and maturing process--they are not a panacea. Trigger films are an innovative and somewhat unorthodox approach, designed primarily for achieving attitude and, hopefully, behavior modification. They are extremely brief, high impact vignettes developed in such a way as to breakdown personal defense mechanisms and "trigger" tension within the viewer and response within each individual in a group discussion setting. Used properly, imaginatively, and wisely, trigger films hold the instructional promise of a potent, exciting, and beneficial attitudinal learning experience arrived at through invigorating self-discovery. The personal reward to the learner is a refreshing, different, and thought provoked empathic outlook on inter-personal as well as philosophical issues and situations.

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*Additional information regarding the various trigger films discussed in this paper may be obtained from the University of Michigan, Television Center, 408 South Fourth Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104.